



WHIRLWIND TOUR DIARY

Dirty Cello conquers China . . . on very little sleep

By Rebecca Roudman

In April, 2013, and again in July, 2014, the San Francisco-based, cello-led blues and bluegrass band Dirty Cello conducted two major tours of China, visiting 15 cities from Beijing to Guangzhou. The first trip featured Rebecca Roudman, cello; Jason Eckl, guitar; Corey Wolffs, violin; and Matt Roads, bass. The second featured Roudman and Eckl, plus drummer Anthony Petrocchi.

After 32 hours, I was in China! We had gotten up in the wee hours of the morning (at 4 AM) and arrived an hour later at San Francisco International airport.

Who knew we were actually too early to get checked in? (Wish I had slept just 20 more minutes.) The band boarded the plane and after a crazy flight path that veered from San Francisco to Vancouver, Vancouver to Beijing, and Beijing to the Chinese city of Dalian, finally arrived.

After meeting our tour guide, where did

we eat? Don't laugh: McDonald's. Since this was our second trip to China, we had learned that as exciting and tasty as Chinese food is, we wanted to grab Western food whenever we could.

After checking into our five-star hotel, my bandmates and I crashed hard, and grabbed as much sleep as we could, knowing that the next two weeks would be a whirlwind of concerts and adventures.

And what adventures! Our band, Dirty Cello, or as our band is called in China, "Rock and Roll Cello" (I think the term Dirty Cello was a little confusing), performed at amazing concert halls, music venues, bars, and even the opening of a giant mall.

Of course, performing in China is different than performing in America. No one in the band can speak Mandarin, and collectively we can only speak ten words of Chinese that our language teacher told us

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were the most important to learn including, "Xi shou jian za nali?" (Where's the bathroom?) and "Wo bu yao." (I don't want.)

The concerts were awesome! In China, each city had an amazing venue that sat between 400–1,000 people, and fortunately for us, each night was packed. As we traveled about each new city, we'd find billboards and advertisements with our pictures. Often, we were Photoshopped onto fanciful backgrounds of lakes and clouds. One time, we even saw ourselves on a commercial playing in our hotel lobby.

And the fans! After every show, we sold CDs, met lots of new people, signed autographs, got our pictures taken, and had enjoyed great conversations with brave fans that wanted to practice their English.

One thing that was different about our concerts in China is that when performing in the States, you have a chance to talk to the audience during the performance. You tell stories, introduce songs, and try to make a connection. In China, however, due to the language barrier, you have to change it up a bit. Instead of speaking, we had to let our music tell the stories. We played a two-handed cello song that had Jason standing on a chair plucking out a pizzicato line, an Irish song featuring Anthony on musical spoons (which had the audience pulling out their smart phones and snapping shots) and . . . Michael Jackson. Yes, that's right. We went from folk to blues to tangos to the '80s.

Really, what more could you want?

And of course, we greeted the audience with "Ni hao" (hello) and ended the concerts with "Xie Xie," (thank you), which oddly enough, earned us a lot of extra applause.

Aside from performing, I had some great cultural adventures. Food in China is a delicious experience. Our tour manager took great pride in introducing us to all of the local dishes, but I was often struck by

some of the more exotic offerings including chicken feet as a snack on the train, sugared corn cut in slices like pizza, Kentucky Fried Chicken for breakfast, and many mysterious dishes she simply described with a smile as “local favorites.”

Traffic was . . . interesting. Imagine sitting in traffic at one moment, and then the next moment, your tour bus driver is driving on the sidewalk to avoid traffic.

Scary yes, but on the plus side, we did get to our destination quicker.

Even walking across the street was a bit daunting. Red lights seem to be more like suggestions than anything else. Of course, we probably looked pretty funny—imagine us elegantly dressed, instruments strapped to our backs, running as fast as we could through the crosswalks before the next honking wave of cars and scooters began.

Between the two tours, the band visited 15 cities with lots of travel in between. I’d heard the horror stories of traveling with a cello on a plane. But this might take the cake.

On one memorable flight, I brought the cello into the cabin of the plane only to discover that every seat was full and the cello couldn’t fit in any of the storage compartments. The flight crew decided that the best place for the cello was the bathroom.

Hey, it could have been worse.

I just felt bad for the 200 passengers who had to share a single bathroom, but at least the cello was safe.

Although I had a great deal of fun on the trip, I got homesick, especially for coffee. So, I went in search of a Starbucks. When we walked through the door with the familiar green mermaid on it, I was a happy musician.

That is until I was sadly greeted by the barista with “We are out of coffee today.”

During the China tours, I had a wealth of experiences that taught me that an important part of being a musician is improvising and adapting to new situations. We used our music to communicate with audiences that spoke a different language, but were right there with us when it came to the rhythm, melody and joy of a live concert.

I left China inspired to continue to take our band, Dirty Cello on more international tours. We had performed, had fun, and then come home . . . and slept for 15 hours straight. ■



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